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THE LACK OF GOOD SERVANTS.

BY MRS. M. E. W. SHERWOOD.

THIS is getting to be a very important and curious question—one of the few that does not right itself. In more than one prosperous village of New England, through central New York and Pennsylvania,—probably the geographical limits could be stretched further,—families are disbanding, going to hotels for their dinners, living in anybody's house but their own, in lack of a servant or servants. These well-to-do people are willing to pay good wages and give their servants every comfort, but a maid who can cook and wash and iron is becoming a greater luxury than a powdered footman in London. A person who can and will work with her hands has become the lawgiver to those who cannot. Where is that class whom, with a fine irony, we call "Help"?

It is a perilous state of things, and not to be endured, when a well-to-do lady, in a prosperous town, has to stay at home from church all through the summer because she cannot find a nurse to care for the baby, and because no maid can be hired for love or money. These people are perfectly willing to pay good wages, to lodge and feed their servants well; but although the cities are full of starving, able-bodied people, the deadlock continues. It is a mysterious and inexplicable problem, more to be wondered at than the occasional and inevitable panic, worse than the strikes, because it lasts all the year round, and impossible, from the point of view of the starving, who would, one would think, rather become domestic servants than starve.

The Swedes make the best servants of all our imported working people, and the reason of it was gravely stated to me by a Swedish cook (who had herself risen to be the mistress of servants, and who deeply deplored the idleness and the disobe-

dience which, she said, were creeping in even amongst them in our American life) to be the old Swedish custom of "*Hus-alga*,"—an old Swedish law by which the masters are still empowered to inflict corporal punishment on their servants, male and female. "Ah!" said Freuda, "that made good servants!" So would have argued the housekeepers of the South; and, no doubt, in a kindly and well-ordered Southern family fifty years ago there were the best of all servants. Authority, not brutality, authority enforced by law, is necessary to the proper conduct of a kitchen, as of a state. Employers should be bound to the rules of justice and humanity, and should have neither right nor power to require from their servants what is unjust or inhuman; also the duties of servants should be clearly defined, reasonable, and fixed. The mistress should have her rights as well as the servant. Once hired and taken into the house, the mistress is legally entitled to the servant's time and service, and the servant should stay out the number of weeks or months for which she has contracted. But in the United States a maid may go at any moment; she follows her caprice; may leave the dinner half cooked and the baby crying in the cradle. The mistress must pay her and let her go.

Of course this terrible condition of inequality cannot exist forever. The American mind is fertile of expedients, and will in time educate both mistresses and maids in their respective duties. It is quite impossible that the affairs of a household can be administered with prosperity and comfort if the mistress does not know what ought to be done and if the servant does not know how to do it. It has been the confusion of the American experiment—this taking of the Irish peasant, the peasant from the fields of Europe, into the small, well-regulated, private family; to expect a creature with no training at all to cook, wash, and iron, sweep, dust, and to take care of children—that most delicate of all industries—acceptably. Her own home has certainly not been a superior establishment for the formation and development of high industrial and domestic qualities. A woman goes out to service as into a new existence. Dress and language are unfamiliar. Her very shoes and stockings are, to her, new and inconvenient appendages. The furniture, food, employment, are as different to her as is the cabin of the Irishman from the palace of the peer. An American kitchen, with its neat cooking-stove and its mechanical

aids to facilitate labor (so easy a book to read for the well-educated wife of an American mechanic), is to the foreign servant a thing as different from her first impressions, associations, and habits as the speaking of Chinese would be to her mistress, were she to be suddenly invited to a tea party in Hong Kong. No doubt both mistress and maid are mutually disgusted and displeased, and the maid takes leave: the mistress is very grateful if she takes nothing else.

There are women born into this world with a capacity for training servants. To them we owe that large class of really good and efficient women who can be found in large cities, Irish women generally, who have been in the country several years, but who are very much in the minority. Now, the existence of such women suggests the first step toward the remedy. Why should not such women open schools for the domestic and industrial training of servants? I have heard of a few such institutions in different parts of the country; that is a favorable omen, but it does not extend far enough. Why will not ladies take it up, as they have done the training-school for nurses, that industry which has had so tremendous a result in making Mrs. Gamps impossible, and giving to poor humanity that which it so gravely needed—an educated intelligence in the sick-room? These establishments for the training of servants are far too few to be felt and appreciated in their advantages throughout the country at large; but imagine what a splendid opening there is for some hundreds of intelligent women who are now, perhaps, eating their hearts out in some lonely New England homes, wondering what they shall do with their lives, if they would organize a training-school for servants, take the ignorant peasant girl just arrived at the government docks, teach her how to cook, or to sew, or to wash and get up fine linen; make of her a thoroughly good servant, teaching her first a subject on which she is always very ignorant,—moral obligation,—an ignorance fostered by the general condition of the social state. Indeed, the general condition of the social state is answerable for the majority of the evils connected with domestic service. Let them teach her that she should treat the property of her employers as carefully as if it were her own; that, as her employers are obliged to do justly by her, so should she be just to her employers; that she should respect their rights, and defend

them, as she hopes that they will respect hers ; and inform her that it is a principle lying at the very basis of civilized life that substantial and valuable service will be well paid for always by those for whom the service is rendered. The law of wages is no mere custom or tradition, but the obligation of natural justice and the rights of man. The debt and obligation are not on one side, however,—on neither side exclusively,—but should conjointly rest on both.

The Americans are the only people in the world who pay well for bad cooking and detestable service, grudgingly given, glad in most instances (if rural housekeepers) to “get a girl,” no matter how inefficient and disqualified she may be, for the work of the house. She must be fed, clothed, and respected, and her wages paid. She may break crockery to any extent, often to that of thousands of dollars ; she may throw away sugar and flour and meat and potatoes by bad cookery ; she may be insolent to her mistress, taking her own time for going out day or evening ; and she may badly wash the flannels and scorch the gentleman’s shirts : the mistress must put up with it, else the precious creature will leave and the lady must do her own work ; or, as a dress-maker who had badly cut some gowns for an employer remarked, putting the fragments in at the door : “Here, finish your gowns yourself.”

This is not good political economy. The servant should be taught moral obligation. We must remember that there is no tyranny in a republic ; there can be none but the tyranny of the masses. And as the welfare of the millions is bound up in this question, as the comfort and prosperity of our great estate must depend on the industrial ability and honesty of those who serve us for wages, it follows that the first thing to teach a servant is a sense of moral obligation. When we take into consideration the early history of those who come to us as domestic servants, the marvel turns out to be, not that they are so deficient, but that they are not more so. Look at the poorer classes in the streets of Glasgow, for instance ; we need not cross to the adjacent kingdom ; we know all about “the pig and the praties,” and really from Pig-and-Pratie-dom came some of the very best of our nurses and maids. No one who has kept house a number of years but has a sprinkling of delicious and refreshing gratitude, in her reminiscences, over some dear and faithful Biddy. Their

faults are those of ignorance and that double brain which is always tripping itself up (the cause of the Irish bull), the impossibility of a clear comprehension of the straight road, blinking, and being blinded by their own wit, and their aimless, inaccurate absence of logic. How much could be done by giving these Norahs the healthy and bracing influence of honest Puritan training in a New England town ! We all know what it has done for some of them,—made them perfect servants.

“ Yes,” the unhappy Massachusetts matron will say, “ it has made them too good to work. They will not come, for twelve dollars a month, to cook, wash, and iron, as they used to do ; no, and the second girl generally marries her master, if he becomes a widower.” Quite so ; we have to meet the enervating influence of prosperity and luxury even here. But we should not be dismayed. We must go still further in our educational efforts for servants. The raw material is being dumped at the government docks at the rate of five or six thousand a week, to state it mildly. The great German steamers, those from Rotterdam, those from Havre and from Liverpool, all deposit great quantities of young women, who have come on to make a living, every day in the week. Why should there not be an organized body of respectable women to meet them, to take them into cleanly homes, to train them to become good domestic servants ? They would be worth half a dozen Lady Clara Vere de Veres, each one of them—worth forty over-educated, brain-feverish students of the higher education, who can do nothing, either as housekeepers or breadwinners. No sadder story is extant than the story of the fate of those highly-educated daughters of washerwomen who have been over-educated, and who cannot find an honest industry and have been driven to a dishonest one.

Now, let us imagine for a moment a cargo of the London “ slaves ” landed on our shores ; those who open the doors of London lodging-houses, the Tilly Slowboys of Dickens. Food, that inalienable right of every servant, has been denied them ; they have pined for good bread and meat, or have been fed on pernicious diet in the back alley of a London lodging-house. The careless, unfeeling, avaricious employer is well known to us who travel. The kitchen larder would be too heavy an item of expense did the white slave receive sufficient wholesome food. Hard work and late hours have made severe exactions on her health, but

perhaps a brother is about to emigrate to America, and the slavey has saved enough to come with him. Hundreds of such girls do come. Perhaps this insufficiency of food has made her dishonest (poor thing ! an Arctic voyager will eat anything when he is mad with hunger) ; she steals a little when she is first taken into an American kitchen, with its liberal supplies. The sense of honor and honesty is deadened in such a creature, of course. But if she were well taught and well trained, and if she learned that honesty were the best policy (having tried both), she might become the most useful, as well as the most trustworthy, of servants.

The business of these noble women who should teach servants should also extend to the mistresses. The duties of servants should be closely defined, reasonable, and fixed. It is astonishing how little friction there is in some families where all this is done by the mistress. She can then hold her domestic distinctly responsible, as a master carpenter can define to his men that such a board must be six inches long and another ten and a half. And to do so, make the servant feel that she has an interest and a stake in the whole body politic ; let her position be reasonable, established, and understood, and she will, in nine cases out of ten, do her work willingly and well, and in the shortest space of time.

Regular and sufficient sleep is essential to the health of servants, and here the mistress comes in for her bit of training. The late hours of society and fashion tell heavily on the higher class of fashionable servanthood. Porters, grooms, footmen, coachmen, butlers, housekeepers, cooks, ladies' maids, are all harassed and injured by the turning of day into night and night into day. A thoughtful mistress will see to this, and have her night work done by different relays ; and so, in the country, in small households, the nurse who is deprived of her rest must be relieved.

But what to do with the slovenly, unregulated heathens, and what to do without them—that is the question. Can no Baron Rumford arise and do for New York and Boston and Philadelphia and Chicago, for Utica and Cooperstown and Exeter and Manchester, for Worcester and for New Haven, for Hartford and Peoria, what he did for Munich, and bring rich and poor together ? Here is, to speak not too figuratively, a large, red-armed, strong German girl on one side of the street, saying, “ Give me work or

I perish !” On the other side is the pale wife of the lawyer or doctor or minister, saying, “Send me some help, or I faint ” ; and the two never come together. Where is the missing link ? It is to this end that the strong and willing girl should be found and educated, and sent into the rural districts, that she should be helped to find what would be to her the greatest boon, exactly such a place as the house of a modest yet comfortable family who would be glad of her service for a reasonable wage. That would be the sort of home that a Norwegian, a Swede, a German, a Swiss, or an English girl would be glad to find, one would suppose.

Now, in the cities and amongst opulent people there is the same complaint, usually, of the lack of fidelity to engagements. Here, again, the employers need education. They enter upon the engaging of servants too hastily, and perhaps part with them too inconsiderately. Servants cannot perform impossibilities, nor can they adapt themselves at once to the fresh habits of fresh people. Those who begin by promising everything are generally the first to perform very little, and those who are sufficiently honest for self-assertion are occasionally rejected as inflexible and impertinent. Too much pliancy is inconsistent with the firmness of truth, and the other extreme is apt to be sycophancy and deceit. “Fancy” is, however, an insufficient guide in the hiring of a servant, and therefore we must fall back on the written testimonial and character.

Here, it is to be feared, the best of women are not always true to themselves. It is said that a lady sometimes gives a good character to a bad servant to get rid of her ; and yet how difficult it is to write the character of a servant ! One wishes to be as kind as the case will allow, and “not stand in the poor girl’s way.” One reasons thus : What is objected to by one family may not be by another ; what one would consider a great fault would be no fault in another ; and the unsuitableness of a servant for one place would be fitness for another. Perhaps as a servant leaves us we forget the annoyance she has caused, and only see a poor creature in search of bread and the money to support a poor mother. So the “character paper” has become a rather useless piece of composition. One often takes a cook whose “character” pictures her a *cordon bleu*, and she proves unequal to the roasting of veal. Where, one asks, are these *plats*

which Mrs. Goodhearte so eloquently describes? Where the light bread and the neat kitchen? Not *chez nous*.

On one point ladies should not be dissimulators, either to themselves or to their friends. A drunkard should not be handed along, nor a woman notoriously bad-tempered or unneat. There will be little, if any, marked improvement among our female servants until ladies are more careful about the giving of characters. The great demand for domestic servants teaches them that, if they leave a place on Monday, they can get another before Saturday; and, indeed, many women live that way, getting their whole month's wage many times over, and only doing two or three days' work for it, perhaps intentionally making themselves impossible. In this respect the law should be called in to protect employers, who are at the present moment the most "unprotected females" in the world. Servants should learn that they cannot get good testimonials without having earned them and deserved them; secondly, that they cannot get good places so easily without characters.

It is a thousand pities that servants should be "changed" so frequently. What some one said of a belle, that she changed her mind toward her admirers as often as Mrs. Marchanay changed her servants, will express what one means. A continuance of service is the only thing which can lead to that faithful performance of one's duties which makes the old servant so respectable. How glad one is to see a familiar hospitable door opened by the same man twice or three times! Nowadays, in America, the old family servant, once so useful, so respected, so beloved, is almost a *rara avis*. Servants are becoming a separate community; our enemies, rather than our humble friends; a lava-bed beneath our feet, full of danger and pitfalls and hidden honeycombing. They have little or nothing in common with the families with whom they live. Their joys and sorrows, their employments in their spare time, their pursuits, aims, and friendships, are all alien to those of the family whose roof shelters them. Were it not for the blessed interposition of children, there would be no chord of attachment, no bond of union, between the family and those who serve them. The latter are unknown strangers for everything except work and duty. Is it, therefore, to be wondered at that they are faithless? We treat dogs and horses much more reasonably; we make them love us, we feed

them, we bespeak them gently, we praise and we notice them. Surely, in the practical working of domestic life, there should be more mutual good will.

Let no mistress be afraid that she may break down her authority or make herself common, or would be likely to evoke a response of impertinence, by being kind to her servants. It is not kindness, but an injudicious use of kindness, which makes anybody rude who ought to be respectful and deferentially civil and grateful. A kind mistress finds a safe and a royal way to the hearts of her servants, by taking an interest in their health, their pursuits, even their tastes. They grow to love her and to kiss the hem of her garments, if they see that she is thinking of them as being human. If she is grateful for an unexpected service, she need indulge in no undignified familiarity. Indeed, they will respect her the more if she is stern with them, so far as her duty requires her to be; but if she is sympathetic, her gentle and intelligent manner of being firm will correct the flippancies of a careless and ignorant servant; it will put a heart into the faithful blunderer who would "like to please." The mistress will not receive an eye-service, a perfunctory service, a mechanical service, but a real service.

As for the accomplished servants, none equal the French as cooks, waiters, laundresses, and ladies' maids; they are peerless, and it is ever an experiment worthy of trial—the employment of the humbler and comparatively untaught rural French as household servants. The Parisians soon get haughty and disdainful, and throw us over as being unworthy of their steel. Even if we do not, being the worm, turn, when too much trodden on, and send them back to their native shores at our own expense, regarding ourselves as worthy to avenge their steel, or steal, they are great rascals sometimes, particularly the *chefs*. Others are perfectly trustworthy, and as for manners they are almost as agreeable as negroes; which was once saying a great deal. It is to be feared that "freedom from her mountain height" has screeched rather too loudly, and has half impaired that nameless grace which once hung about the delightful old negress in her colored turban, who loved the young "Mars" so well and to her death served her "Mess Maria." One might go into the subject of the ballot, and whether it has been a boon to the negro. One could write an essay on the manners of the colored coachmen and waiters at

Washington ; but there are some epics which are more eloquent unwritten, perhaps.

The story of the unfaithful servant is as old as human history, and we have not yet reached the Molière period, when the valet comes into comedy as the most important functionary on the dramatic side of life. The servant is disappearing. In our history there is a fear of his becoming extinct—a species of dodo. It is not the question of his non-ability, but of his nonentity, that troubles us. He is not there ; his undusted chair awaits him. It is the curious lack of sequence which troubles us. Why, then, is it that the mistress stands on one side of the street and the maid on the other awaiting the signal ? The one beckons ; the other does not see. Who will find the open sesame, the talismanic word ? Where are they, faithful or unfaithful ? Are they to be found on the docks ?

The first impediment in the way of the lady philanthropist will be to meet and forestall the rush which is made for all available female help by the intelligence-office men, who seize these newly-arrived immigrants for the great hotels and summer watering-places. A landlord of one of the largest of these says that he takes these girls, not asking for characters, and makes them work under a grim housekeeper, only anxious that they should be neat about the tables and bedrooms, and leaving it to their own sense of propriety to dress themselves becomingly. As for lovers, and their amusements after their work is done, he asks no questions. This cannot be a very good school for domestic servants, and very few ladies will take a domestic who has only this background. I happened to talk with a pleasant-faced Norwegian girl at a Western hotel last winter who was a chambermaid, and she deplored this state of things. She said that her countrywomen would like permanent homes, but that the money to be earned in hotels was much greater. They could retire sooner, and get married, or return to Norway. She said the life in hotels was very hard, especially as many girls are put to sleep in one large room, coming in at all hours of the night, chattering and singing, and keeping those awake who desired a quiet night's rest. She declared herself quite anxious to go to some retired spot where she could live in a family, but she said no one would take her with only a hotel recommendation.

There is such a prejudice in the American mind against house-

hold service that I wish there could be a medal offered by the State—a sort of *rosière* business, a fitch-of-bacon reward, or some of the old feudal customs revived—to reward the successful competitor for the power to be a good kitchen maid. It should be made an order of nobility, and then we might have some hope that our rural gentry could be served well in their own houses, as their fathers and mothers have been.

It is instructive to read in this connection an admirable paper by the clever writer, Katherine Pearson Woods, on the “Queens of the Shop, the Workroom, and the Tenement,” to learn what painful and really unnecessary sufferings a woman will undergo rather than to take the comforts of a place in a respectable family, where she would be fed and warmed and cared for, well paid, if only she would accept the profession of domestic service, “honorable amongst all men” and historically and poetically noble. Mrs. Woods says: “To enumerate the different trades by which women in New York are endeavoring, not to live,—that for many of them is as utterly unattainable a goal as the end of the rainbow,—but simply to postpone as long as possible their appearance at the morgue or in the cemetery—to attempt to do this would be useless.” She goes on to describe the girls who work in soap-factories and whose business it is to wrap the separate cakes, while hot, in paper. The caustic soda used in the manufacture first turns their nails yellow, then eats away the ends of their fingers. There seems no way to help this, as the deftness of touch required would be, of course, impossible if the worker wore gloves. It is, indeed, only possible to a given set of workers for a very short time, but there are always plenty to take their places when they drop out! What becomes of these poor mutilated creatures no one asks.

But might it not be possible to save them from this terrible doom, if we had training-schools for servants, as for nurses, where they could be supported while learning their trade, and apprenticed for five years after? Could we not find capitalists in great rich America who would endow such schools, far more needed than public libraries or Cornell University, where the great lack of domestic service could be filled, and girls saved from the making of arsenical artificial flowers, poisonous dyed feathers, the nicotine paralysis, and the soap cakes? Must we continue to have the “Song of the Shirt,” and the “Sweater”? As Mrs. Woods says

at the end of a most impressive article, "God help us all, unless we change this state of things."

I asked my Norwegian friend why the girls coming from the lonely pastures of her native land were so anxious to avoid the country and to herd together in cities. "Oh!" said she, "it saves the homesickness." Perhaps there is a great truth hidden here, which the philanthropic men of America would do well to study. It might be a part of the training-school to find out how to enliven these lonely lives, so that the great rush for the overcrowded town, with its dismal tragedies, could be avoided. It is worth consideration, and I cannot but hope that some Mrs. Fry, Mrs. Howard, Florence Nightingale, or Louisa Lee Schuyler may take it up.

"I need the counsel of thy larger thought." I have seen in the course of years, during which time I have employed many servants, the great need of instruction, and how grateful a girl is to be taught. Any lady who knows a little about cooking can by patience make a fairly good cook out of very raw material in a few months. The influence of a refined household tells on the almost savage nature in a short time. The worst of this is that the accomplished servant will leave her patient instructor, and go off to "fresh woods and pastures new" and to higher wages, and here is the first duty of the philanthropic schoolteacher; the servant must be taught the moral obligation to stay where she is wanted.

We can never have the "perfect service" in a republic, but we can do a great deal better than we are doing. We can take a lesson from the founders of the constitution, who so well contrived to put it into the head of every American citizen that he was the most important brick in the building, and that on him must all depend, that most American men work well for themselves, for the State, and for the Union. When we can so educate a trained domestic service that the women employed find that they are doing the best for themselves, as well as for us, in being good cooks and laundresses, good nurses and maids, we shall have solved one of the great problems of the nineteenth century.

This might well become an international question, and kindly women might combine with their English, Norwegian, Swedish sisters as to these girls, who should be sent fresh from their own homes to their American homes. I know all about Miss Emily Faithfull's efforts and her failure, but I think that it was

because she attempted too much, and with too little help on the other side. Now that organizations are so possible and thorough as we see in the woman's temperance societies and in many philanthropic and artistic combinations, why should we not attempt the importation of female servants who, being helped and educated, shall be bound by some contract to stay in their places until their education is paid for—that education not being Shakespeare and the musical glasses, not French or Italian, not the piano (excepting to dust it), but the finer and rarer art of making a house pleasant to live in, of cooking an eatable dinner, of doing the work of a kitchen neatly and well.

M. E. W. SHERWOOD.